

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

Seeds of Revolution: Discontent in Petrograd *Winship to the Secretary, U.S. Consulate in Petrograd, March 20, 1917*

SIR: I have the honor to report that as a result of serious economic political and military disturbances, the government of this city and district has been completely assumed by an Executive Committee of the Imperial Duma, at least for the time being.

On the beginning of the week of March 4, a shortage of black bread was noticeable. This at once caused unrest among the laboring classes. All other prime necessities within the means of the working classes had already gradually disappeared as the winter advanced: meat, sugar, white flour, buckwheat, potatoes. Fish, fowls, eggs, milk, cheese and butter had for a long time been so expensive that they were only within the means of the very well-to-do classes. The unrest first took visible form in the outskirts and factory districts of the city Wednesday, March 7, when the workmen struck after the dinner hour and met in groups to discuss the situation.

The next day, Thursday, March 8, there were spontaneous and isolated demonstrations. In many places, a few of the working class, mostly women, tired of waiting in bread lines in the severe cold began to cry "Give us bread." These groups were immediately dispersed by large detachments of mounted police and cossacks.

March 9, large crowds of women marched to the Kazan Cathedral (opposite the Consulate) with bared heads, still crying for bread and shouting to the police "Give us bread and we will go to work". This crowd was peaceable and was dispersed.

Saturday morning the crowds, composed of working men and students, visibly with a serious purpose, came from all districts to the center of the city. Besides calling for bread, these crowds shouted "Down with the Government", "Down with the Romanovs", and occasionally "Down with the War". The mounted police endeavored to drive the mobs from the Nevsky, the main street, but resistance was made and barricades built on the side streets. The police withdrew after firing on and charging the crowds with whips without success. Their place was taken by infantry who fraternized with the people. Announcement was made by the police that after

6 o'clock that day, all groups of persons would be fired upon. The crowds did not disperse, and street battles took place, especially on the Nevsky resulting in great loss of life.

At this time the infantry and Cossacks refused to fire on the crowds or to charge them. Towards evening a detachment of Cossacks actually charged and dispersed a body of mounted police.

Sunday, when it became known that the Emperor had prorogued the Duma and that it had refused to recognize this order, there was disorganized and sporadic fighting all over the city, with heavy loss of life. The unmounted police were withdrawn from the streets. Many regiments which had been locked in their barracks mutinied during the night, killed some of their officers, and marched to defend the Duma, which was still sitting.

By Monday the disorganized riots developed into a systematic revolutionary movement on the part of the working men and the constantly growing numbers of mutinied troops, to capture the city of Petrograd [St. Petersburg.] The fighting moved rapidly across the city from the Duma as a center, so that by Monday night, only isolated houses and public buildings, upon which machine guns were mounted, were held by the police and the few remaining loyal troops. At midnight the Duma had announced that it had taken the Government into its own hands and had formed an Executive Committee to be the head of the temporary Government.

Tuesday and Wednesday the fighting was confined to volleys from machine guns fired by the police from the isolated housetops, public buildings and churches, and the return fire by the soldiers, such fighting continuing until all police were taken. Violence necessary in arresting Government, army and police officials, took place at this time.

I shall make only a limited number of observations on the political situation leading up to the economic situation in this district, it being supposed that the Embassy has already cabled a report in the matter

Immediately following the assumption of national authority by the Executive Committee of the Duma, the Council of Workmen's Deputies challenged its exclusive authority. This council is a body which existed secretly during the old régime and represented the revolutionary workmen. Spontaneously a third authority appeared in the Council of Soldiers' Deputies which soon merged with the Workmen's council under the name of the Council of Workmen's and Soldiers' Deputies.

Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, (the 13th, 14th and 15th), were, up to the present, the most critical times Of the revolution, when there was immediate danger of civil war in Petrograd between the Duma and the Council of Workmen's and Soldiers' Deputies. This crisis passed however, when, late on Thursday afternoon, a provisional agreement was reached. This agreement was based on a temporary Ministry chosen from the members of the Duma with a political program of eight points

1. Immediate political amnesty.
2. Immediate freedom of press, speech, meeting, the right to strike, these rights to be extended to soldiers in so far as compatible, with military organization
3. Immediate abolition of all caste, religious and race disabilities.
4. Immediate preparation for a constitutional convention to determine the permanent form of National Government
5. Immediate substitution of militia with elective officers, under control of local self-governing bodies in place of the old police system.
6. Election to local self-governing bodies by universal direct, equal and secret suffrage.
7. Retention of arms by the revolutionary soldiery, the soldiery not to be removed from Petrograd.
8. Retention of strict military discipline during actual service with full civil freedom to soldiers when not on duty.

On the 2nd of March the Emperor abdicated for himself and for his son in favor of his brother, the Grand Duke Michael On the 3rd the Grand Duke Michael declined the throne unless it should be offered him by the Constitutional Convention. This again averted further civil, war as it put all parties in agreement to await the Constitutional Convention.

The old police which was maintained by the National Government as a part of the Ministry of the Interior, has been replaced by the City Militia, a volunteer organization under the auspices of the National Duma and the Board of Aldermen. It is now maintaining order throughout the city and cooperating with the Commissariats in the various wards. The Commissariats are under the control of the Council of Workmen's and Soldiers' Deputies, which still sits in conjunction with the National Duma.

Passport regulations for foreigners have not been changed and are controlled by a new *Gradonatchalnik* (Chief of City or Chief of Police) who is now, as formerly, dependent on the Ministry of the Interior.

A new Mayor has been chosen by the Aldermen. He is attempting to control and improve the local food supply which is again the danger point as at the beginning of the revolution. All necessities have to be brought to Petrograd from the provinces and a serious food shortage now exists if it is not relieved at once it will cause further serious disorders capable of developing into new revolutionary movements with greater socialistic tendencies than heretofore.

Today, March 20, for the first time in ten days, a very few electric street cars are running but not enough to constitute a resumption of the service. The workmen have not returned to the factories as was hoped

I have [etc],

NORTH WINSHIP

File No. 861.00/330

Source

United States Department of State, *United States Department of State/ Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, 1917, with the address of the President to Congress, December 4, 1917, pp. 1208-1210*

<http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/FRUS/FRUS-idx?type=turn&entity=FRUS.FRUS1917.p1374&id=FRUS.FRUS1917&size=XL&q1=March%2020,%201917>